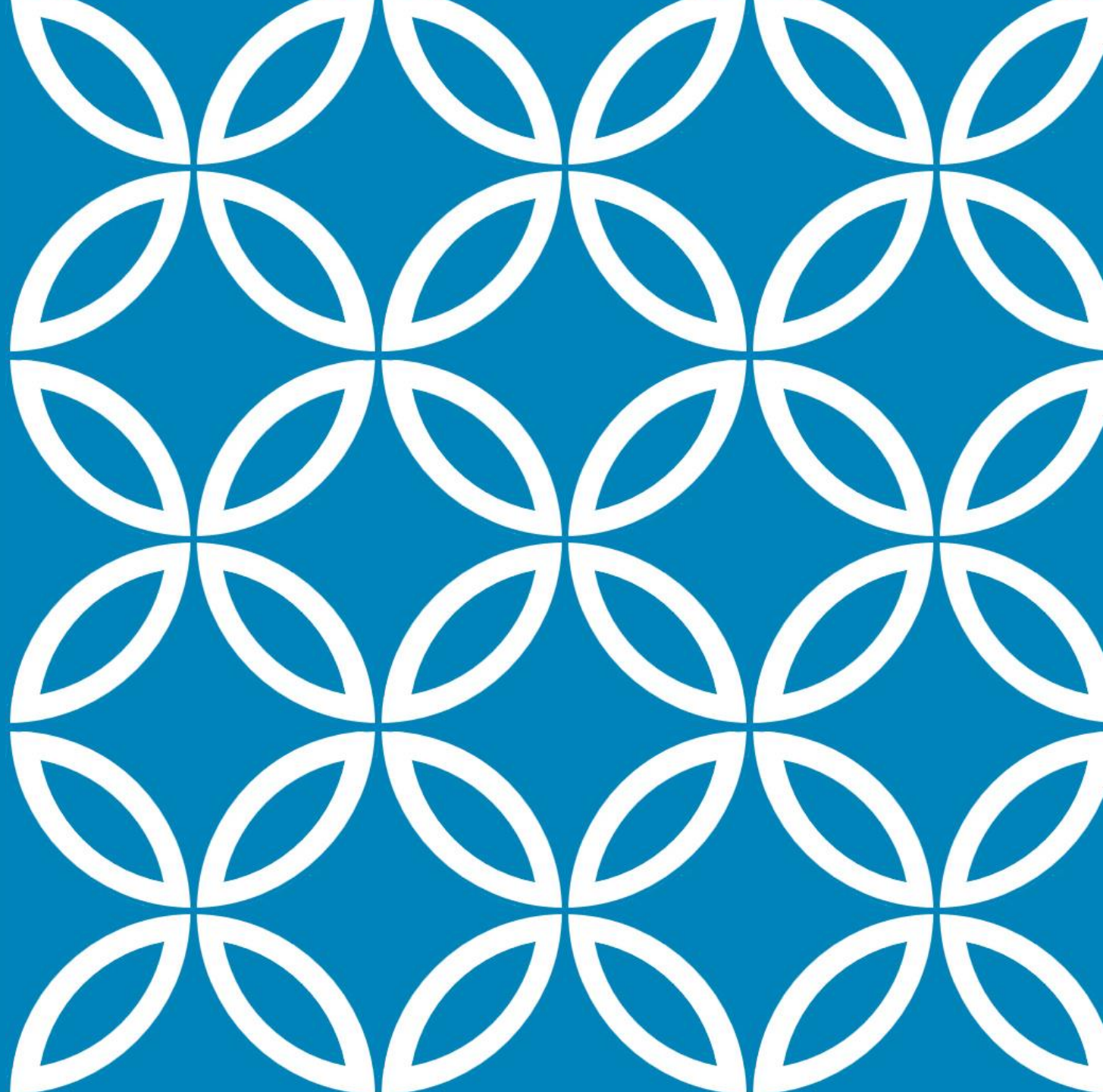
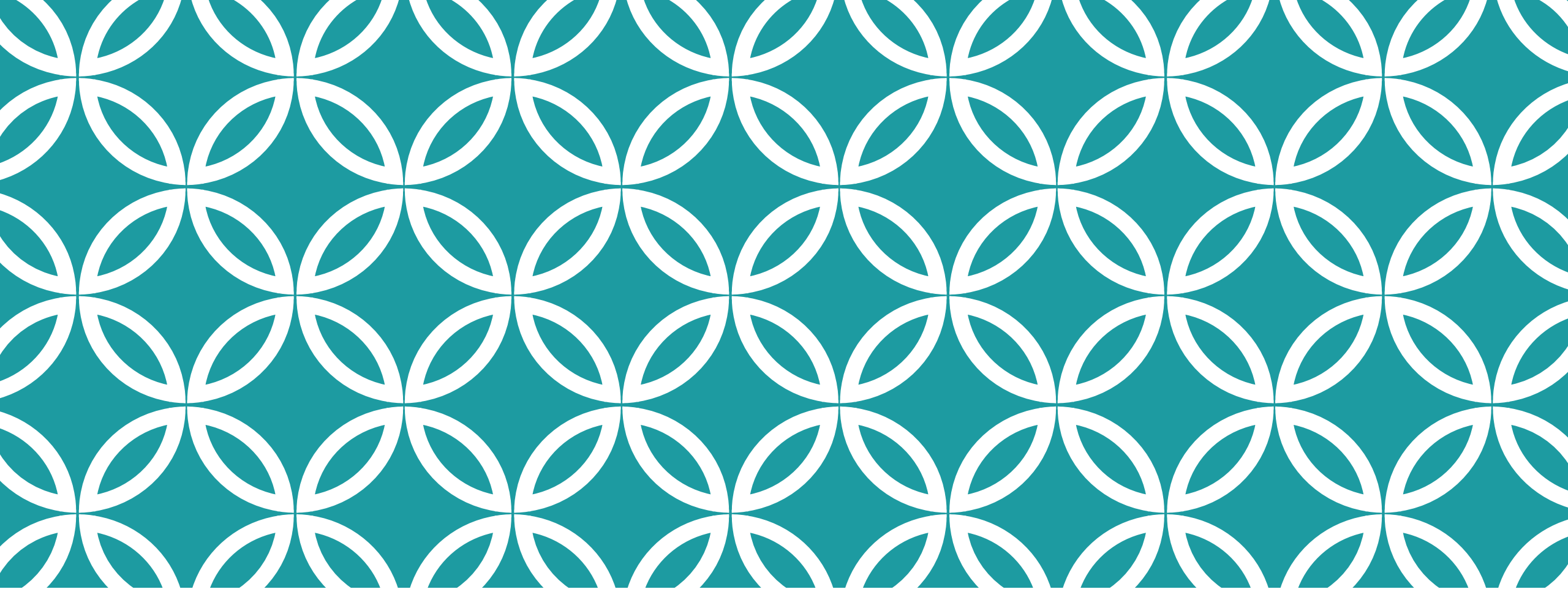


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS



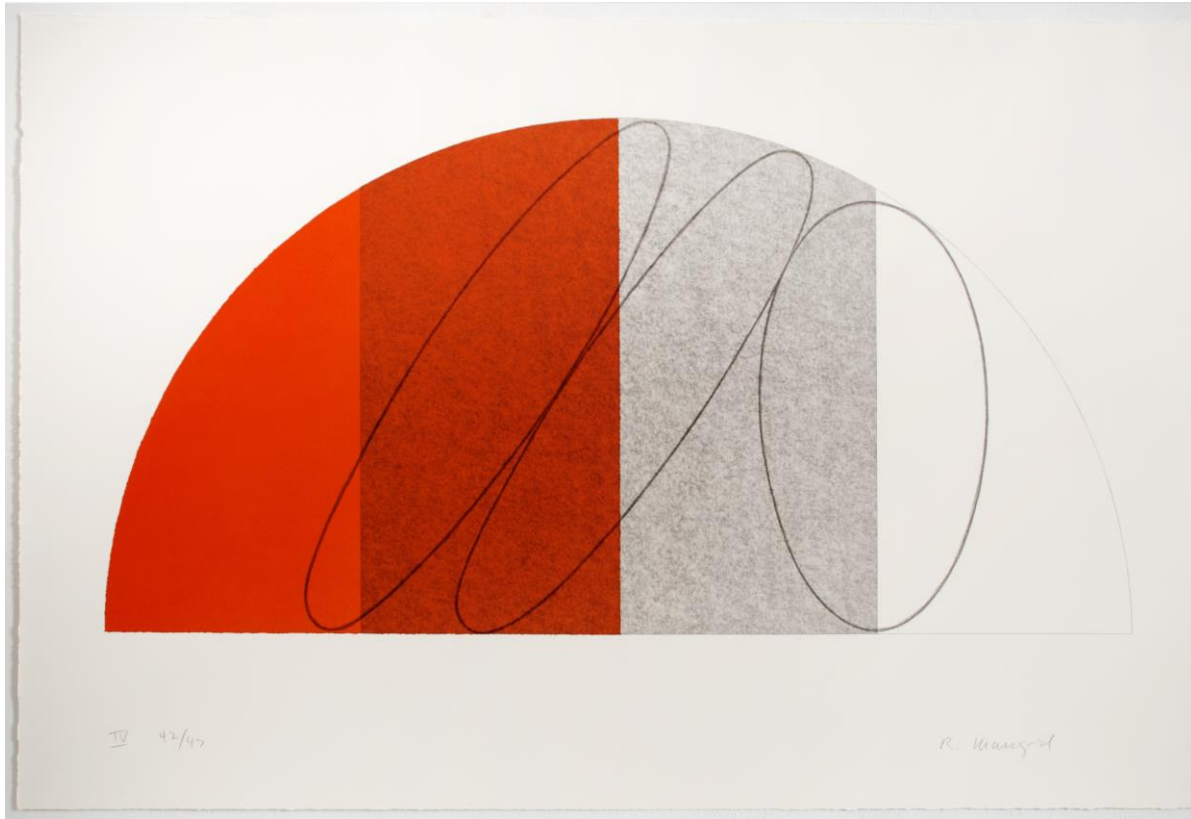


REVISION

In the last section, we looked at a number of different definitional discussions and how they relate to different disciplines in the academy.

We also examined philosophical and linguistic approaches to the issue of dialogue, narrowing in on questions about the minimal form of dialogue and the necessary characteristics of dialogue.

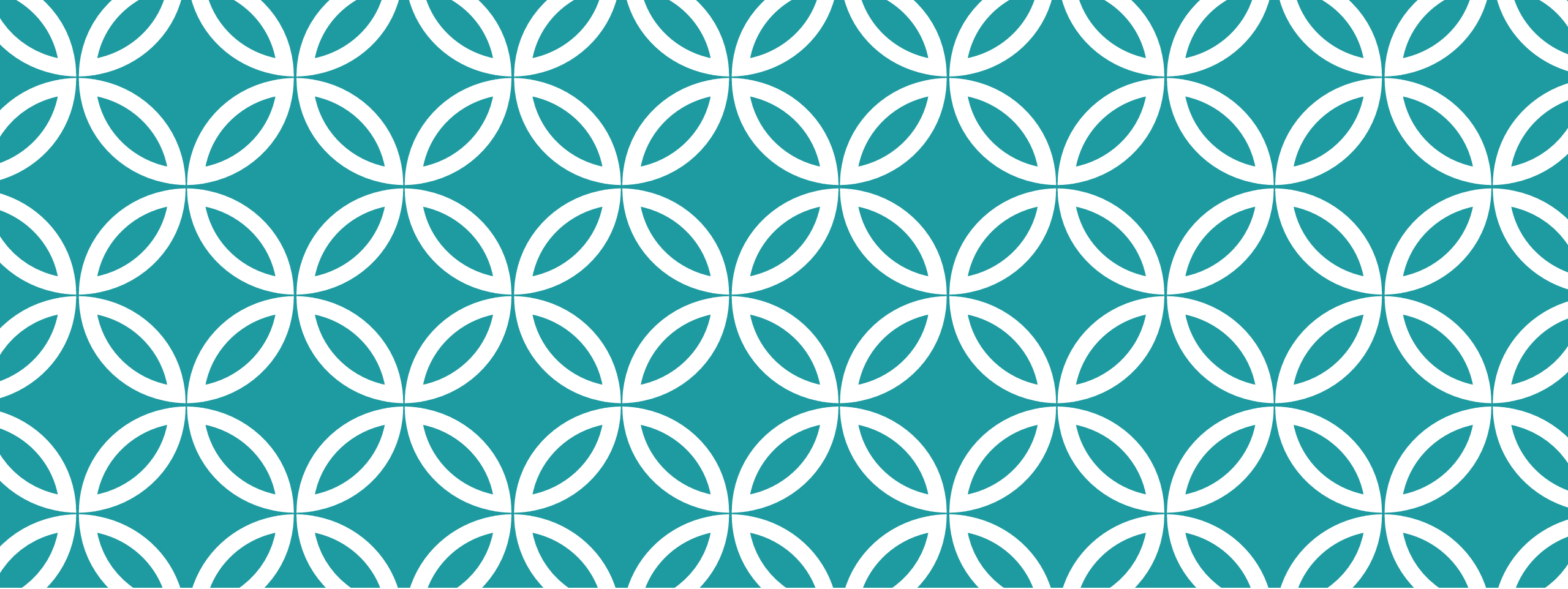
The section also took the time to visit some of the key scholars of hermeneutics, like Gadamer, who we will revisit later in the module.



REVISION

You also had four readings to complete (Clack, Cannon, Ward, and Ward) which attempted to explore further Wittgenstein's thoughts on the nature of religion as a form of grammar, to offer resources for a deeper exploration of the meaning of post-modernity for contemporary forms of religious belief, and for the study of religion in contemporary society.

Make sure that you engage with the discussion forums on Moodle and offer up a question for reflection for the group.



THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS



THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

The next few sections of the module move us on from broad discussions of the nature of our current society and their relation to aspects of religious belief and practice to a much more focused consideration of matters directly appertaining to interfaith studies and interfaith dialogue.

As we have seen in the previous sections, the general interest in Interfaith issues as a subject of religious and theological study arises from a particular historical and social context.

They arise in response to specific issues and aim to address those issues from within the grammar and context of those concerned by them





THEOLOGY OF RELIGION

For historical, cultural, and social reasons (as explored in the previous sections), the concern for interfaith matters as an object of academic study arises largely from within the Christian tradition, with a variety of particular approaches becoming a prominent feature of this reaction.

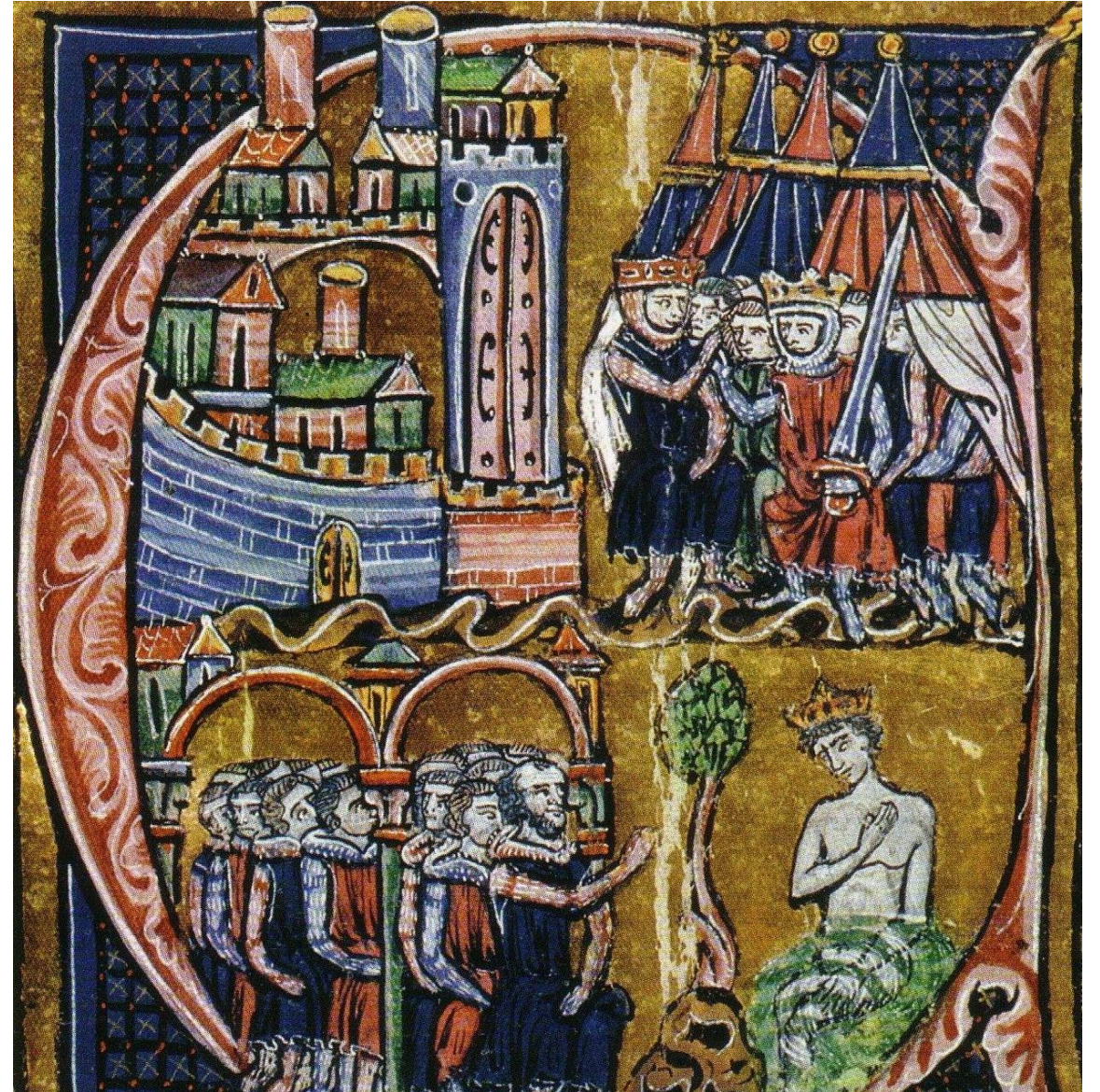
We begin, therefore, with the ‘theology of religions’ – a explicitly and specifically Christian reaction to the existence and continuation of non-Christian belief – that dominates the genesis of the field of interfaith studies and continues to exert great pressure on it.

THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Why do we see the concern for interfaith matters emerge within this explicitly Christian context?

Historically, we see the prominence of thinking about other religious rise as the prominence of places where other religions are prominent also rises

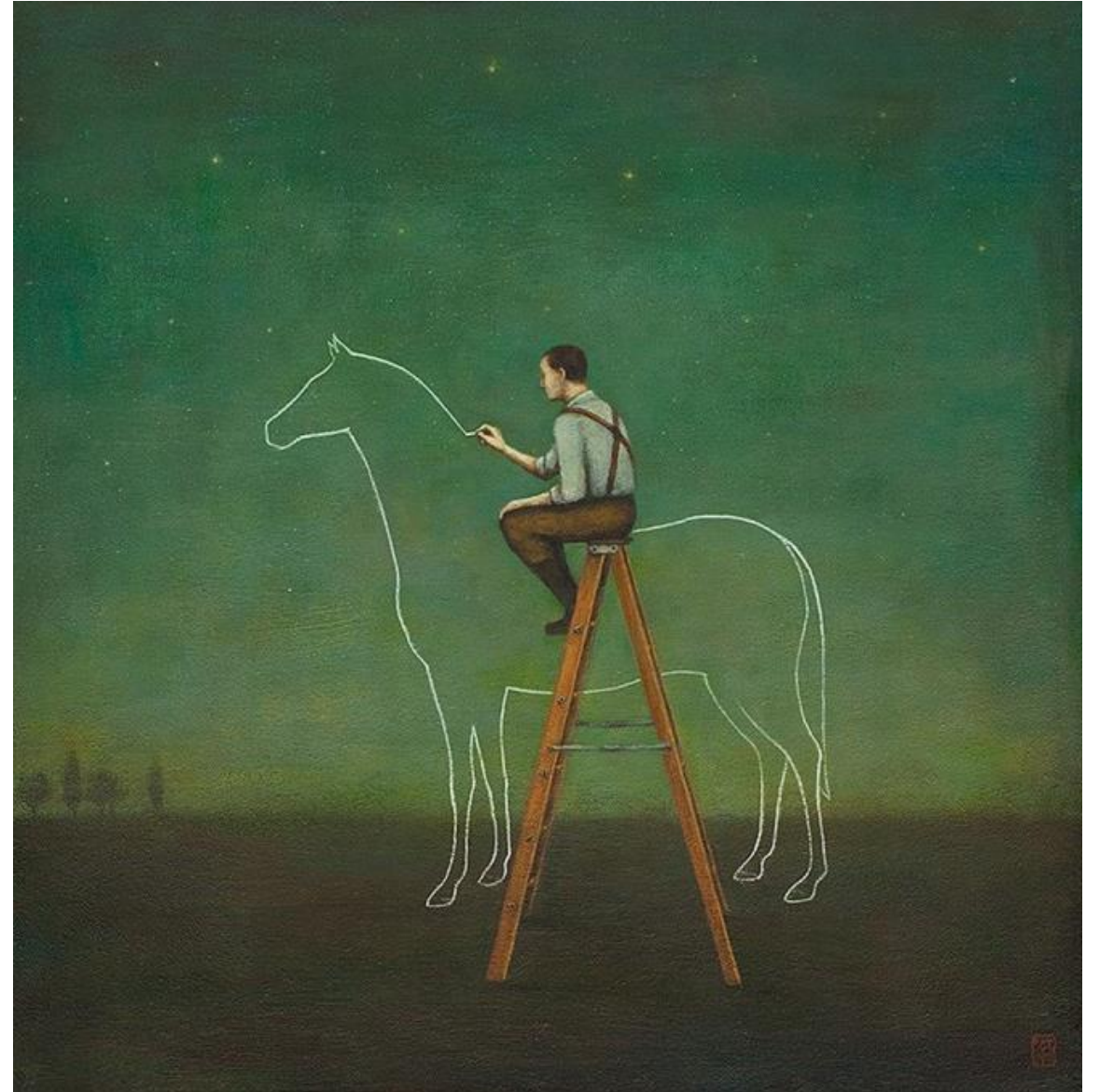
This can occur either as a threat (e.g. Crusader polemics) or where this rise is political / cultural in nature (e.g. post-colonialism)



THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Aspects of post-colonialism, economic growth in non-western locations, organisation and representation of non-western religions, increasing migration and cultural contact etc., gradually push inter-religious matters up the awareness of western, Christian, theologians throughout the hundred or so years.

The very existence and continuing existence of alternative religious traditions requires a response from the Christian narrative – the ‘theology of religions’ is Christianity’s attempt to explain other religions.



THE CLASSIC FRAMEWORK

In our discussion of the theology of religions, we often refer to the 'classic framework' (Race, 1982) which is a taxonomy of responses to questions which arise for the Christian tradition from the existence and continuation of other religious traditions.

Questions like:

Given that these non-Christian people exist, and don't seem to be going away, where do they fit into the Christian story?

What does their existence mean for the truth of Christianity – is it relevant? Does it undermine it?

What does Christianity have to say to them – solely conversion?

What happens to good people who die without ever having heard of Jesus / while being a non-Christian?



THE CLASSIC FRAMEWORK

In the Christian tradition, these questions largely boil down to one question that is concerned with the central purpose of Christianity, salvation.

Simply — can non-Christians be saved?

The framework identifies three potential replies — yes, no, and maybe.

We call these three responses — pluralist, exclusivist, and inclusivist.

Over the next couple of sections in the module, we will examine each position in turn and look at some scholars who argue for each.



EXCLUSIVIST / INCLUSIVIST / PLURALIST

Roughly, the positions are as follows:

Exclusivist – only one tradition can lead to salvation, those outside cannot be saved.

Inclusivist – only one tradition mediates salvation, but it is available to other outside the Christian tradition in some way.

Pluralist – all or many traditions lead to salvation and all point to same ultimate reality



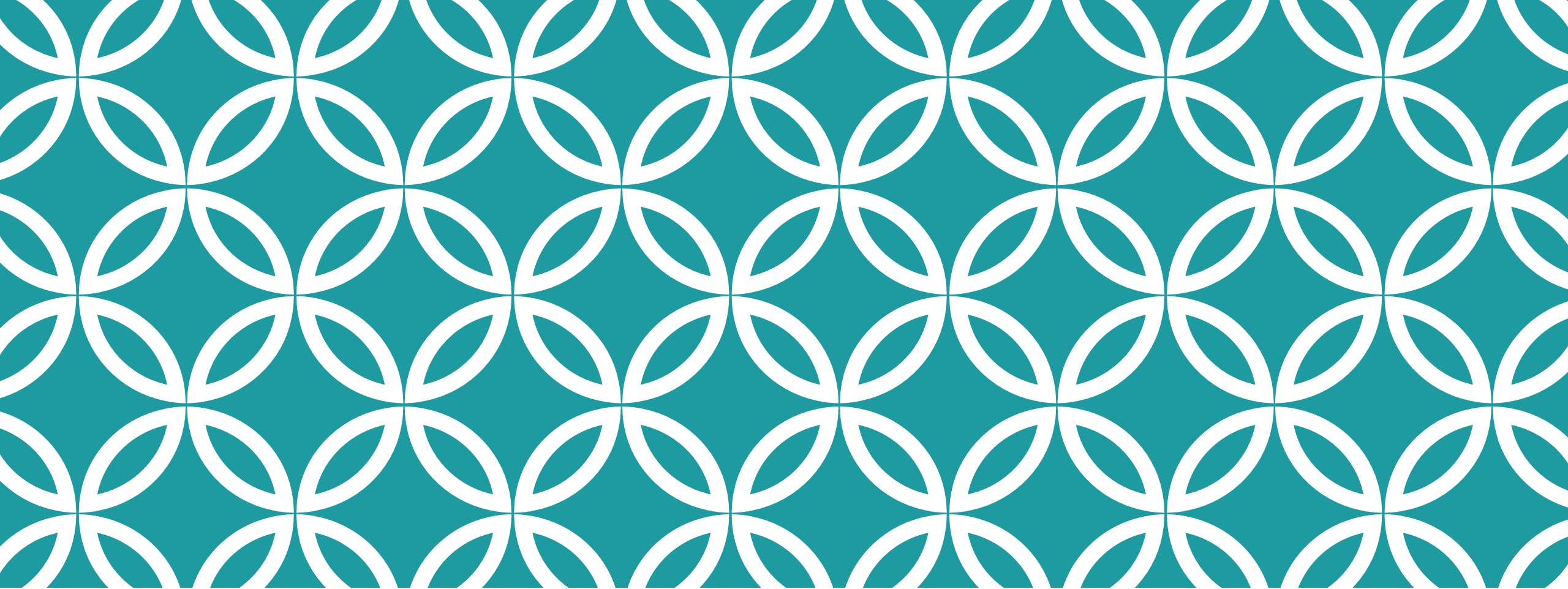
EXCLUSIVIST / INCLUSIVIST / PLURALIST

It is important throughout your studies to remember the origin of this framework as it has had a huge impact on the genesis, current scope, and continuing obsessions of the field.

It is also important to remember that there is a difference to be drawn between an external description of a position and an internal position that argues for a position – this can most easily be discerned as the distinction between an –ist and an –ism.

e.g. pluralist and pluralism

The typology attempts to categorise *Christian responses to the existence of religious plurality according to their view of salvation*



INCLUSIVISM

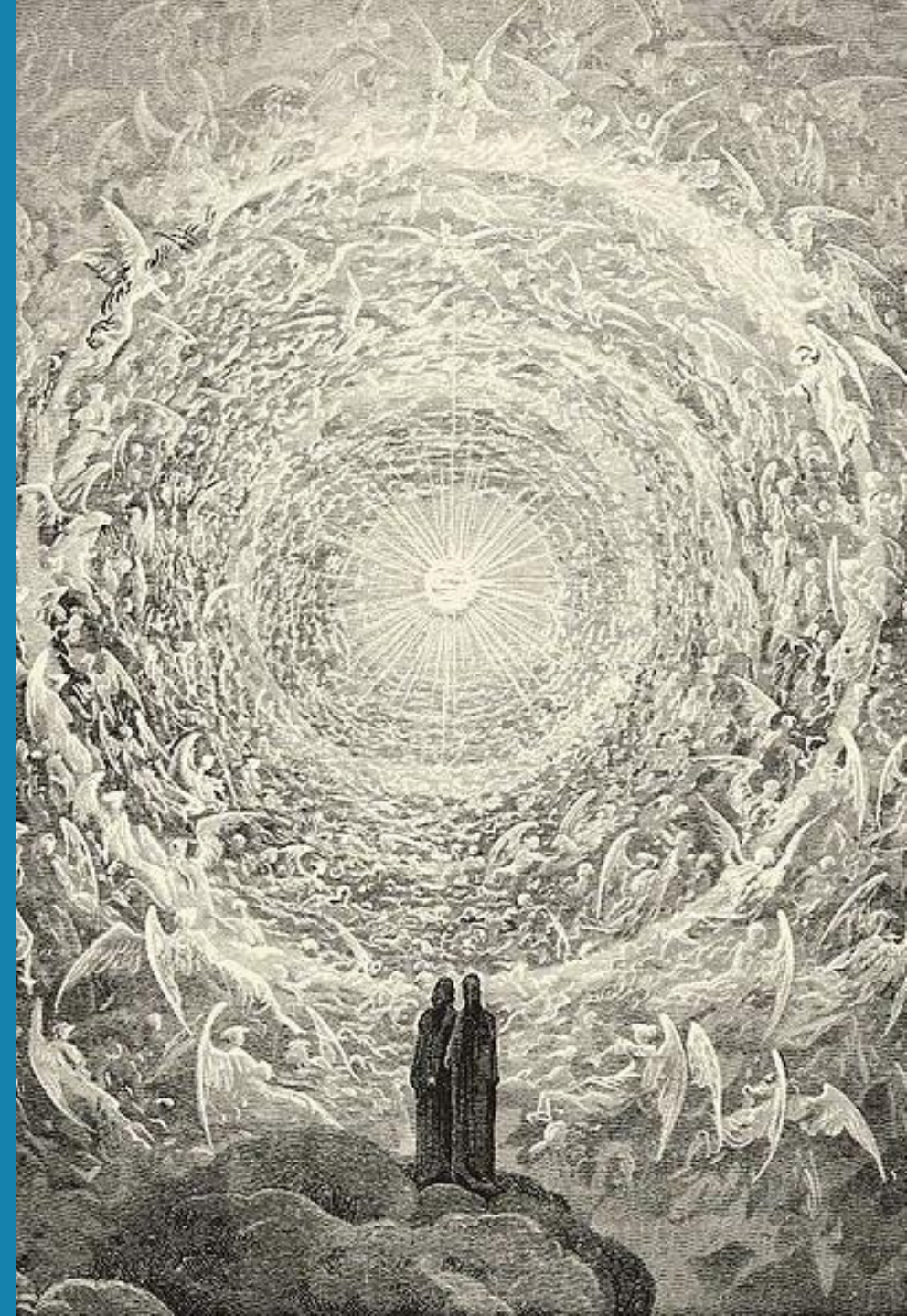


INCLUSIVISM

It may seem odd to begin discussing these positions with Inclusivism, which is often seen as perhaps the most complicated of positions – after all, “maybe” requires greater definition than either “yes” or “no”.

Yet, Inclusivism, the position that only one tradition offers salvation but that this can be accessed through others, offers an interesting middle point of comparison for our coming examinations of exclusivism and pluralism.

We will begin by sketching out the basis for Christian inclusivism, before moving onto looking at particular ways in which Christian scholars have argued for it.



INCLUSIVISM

Inclusivism is also a useful place to start because it has been part of the belief of the Catholic Church since Vatican II; it has been accepted by the Commission of the Church of England; and it informs the theology of many mainstream Protestant denominations.

In general, the position holds that while Christ came into the world to save humankind through his grace, that grace is accessible to those who have not heard the teachings of Christ. This saving power can be mediated through other religious traditions or is open to completion by Christianity.

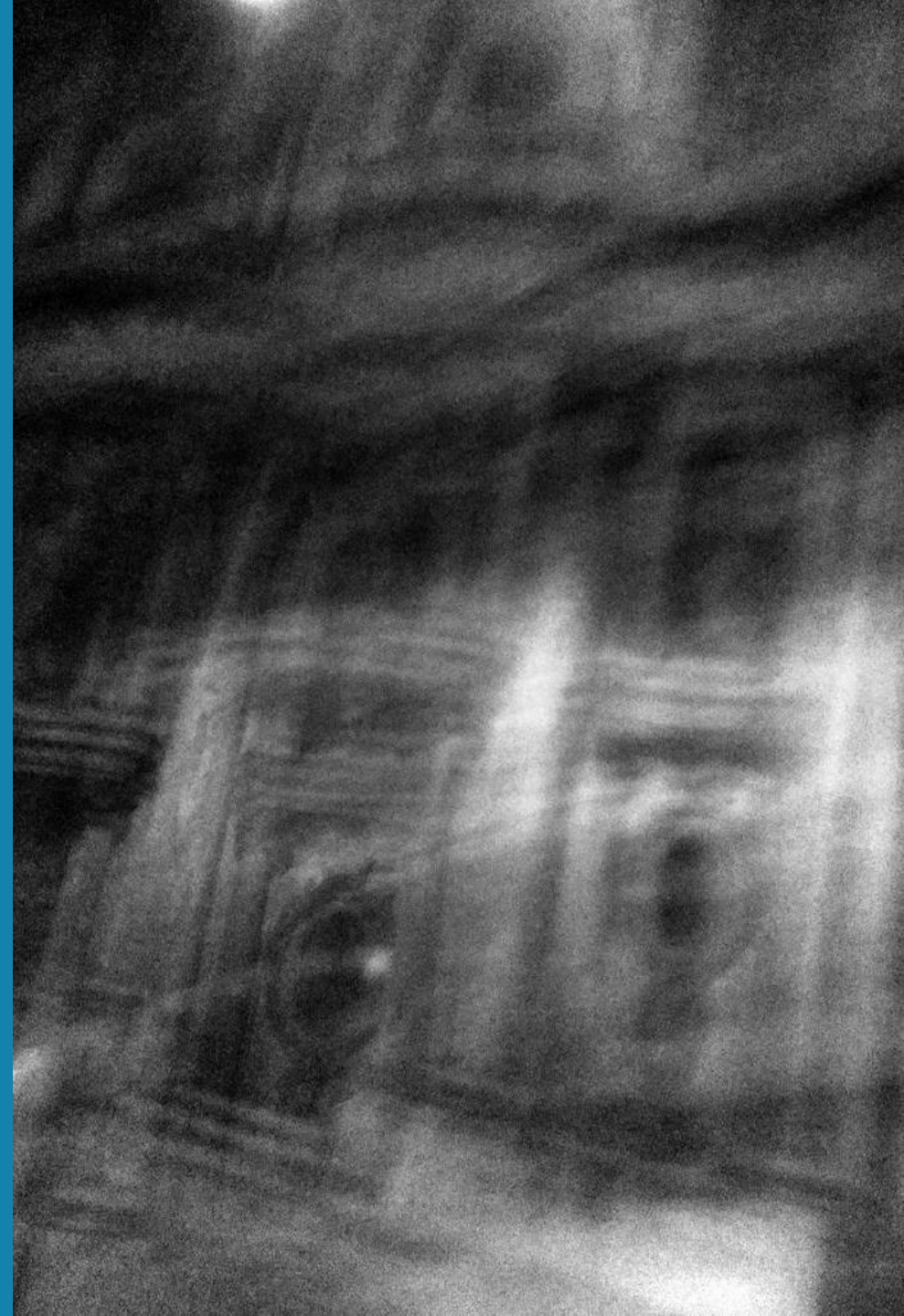


INCLUSIVISM

This institutional alignment with the inclusivist position arises out of historical contexts, theological needs, and responses to the rising importance of interfaith matters for increasingly globalised churches.

However, we should not see Inclusivist thinking as an entirely new position – there is plenty of biblical basis that is often offered for it, as well as traditional theological discussion.

Nor should we see Inclusivism as necessarily a ‘liberal’ position, with plenty of support from conservative Christian traditions, including the evangelical and roman catholic expressions we will look at in this section.



INCLUSIVISM

For example:

In Acts, Chapter 10 there is a reference to a Roman centurion called Cornelius, who had a vision of an angel and who was used by God to provide hospitality to Peter.

In response to Cornelius' hospitality Peter says of Cornelius: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and who do what is right." (Acts 10:34-5)



INCLUSIVISM

Another example might be the Christian writer CS Lewis:

Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*

“We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved by Him.”

(Lewis, 1966, p.65)



INCLUSIVISM

Generally, proponents of an inclusivistic attitude toward the salvation of non-Christians, put forward three types of argument based upon the Christian tradition, drawing on scripture, reason, and tradition. These are:

1. God desires to save all people;
2. God provides for the salvation of people;
3. God promises the salvation of people

For God only to allow salvation to those who have heard Christ's message and received Christ's grace through having heard the message, is seen to be inconsistent with God's desire to save all people.

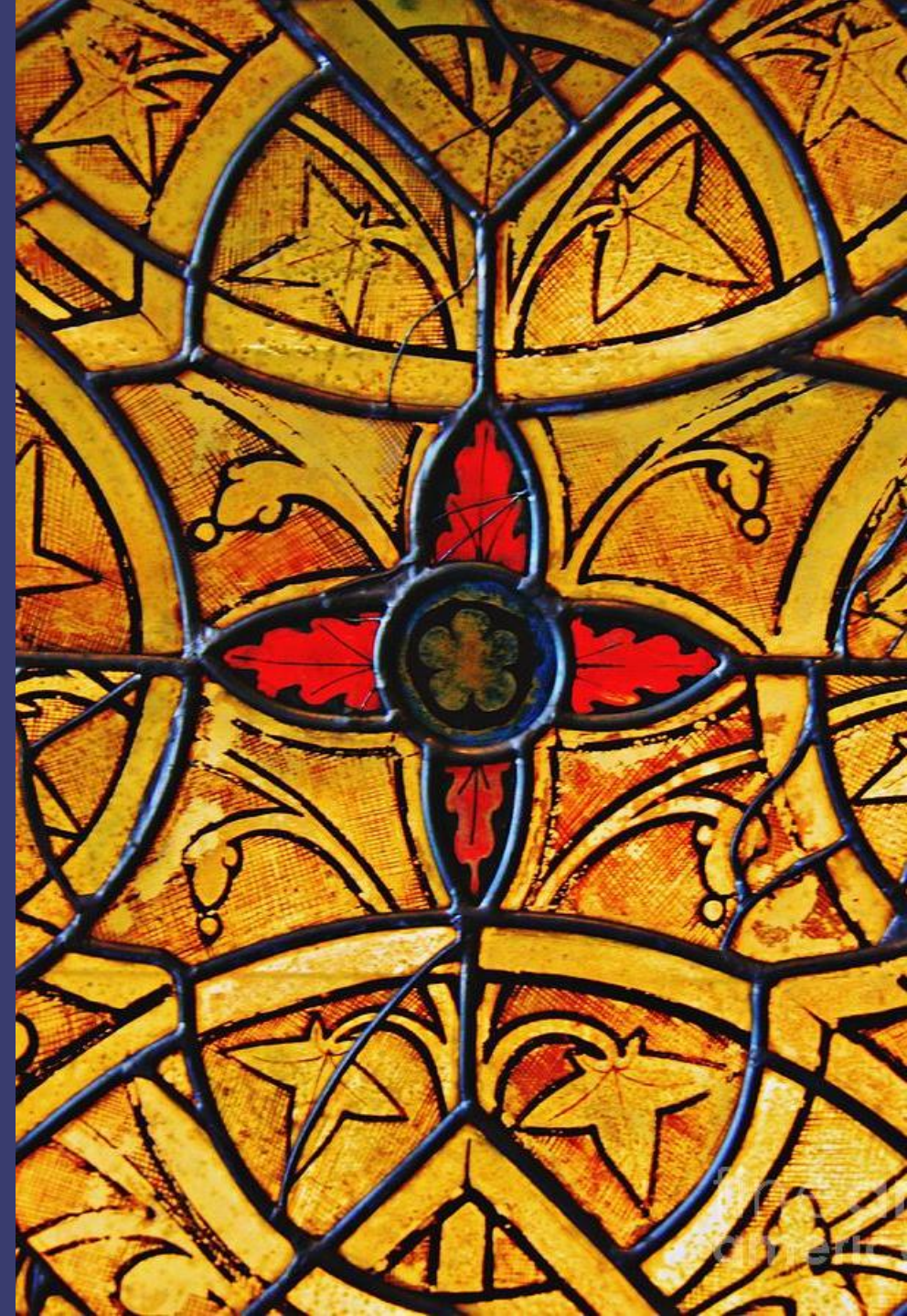


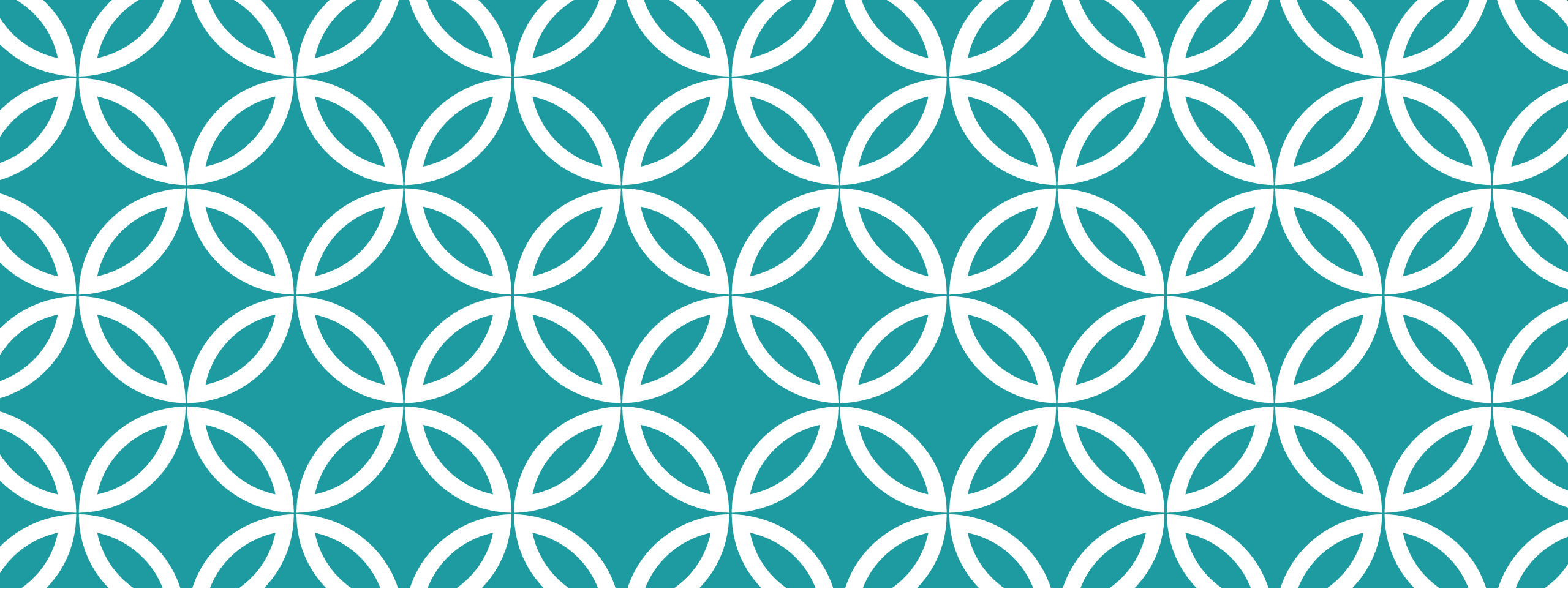
INCLUSIVISM

With regard to the first argument — that God desires to save all people — they might quote the words of Paul when he writes God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4).

With regard to the second argument — that God provides for the salvation of all people — one might quote a number of passages, Titus 2:11 states “the grace of God has brought salvation to all men.”

With regard to the third argument — that God promises salvation to all people — one could refer to Ephesians 1:10 which talks of the “summing up of all things in Christ”.





EXAMPLES OF INCLUSIVISM

Pinnock, Rahner, & Kung

EXAMPLES OF INCLUSIVISM

I want to take a moment to take a look at three specific forms of inclusivist thinking that have emerged within the Christian tradition at this point.

As I am sure you have noticed, Inclusivism leaves open a number of potential areas of difference - such as how exactly believers of other religions are saved and on what basis – which means often inclusivists do not necessarily agree with each other on the method of inclusion.

This examination will hopefully highlight some of this discussion!



CLARK PINNOCK

An important exponent of the inclusivist position within contemporary evangelical Christianity is a scholar called Clark Pinnock.

Pinnock argues that salvation is mediated through Jesus Christ alone; but there is a wider hope which offers the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, including those who have not been evangelised (Pinnock, 1992).

This is a classic example of inclusivist thinking within the Christian tradition.



CLARK PINNOCK

Clark Pinnock argues that other religions can provide a preparation for the reception of the Gospel.

Pinnock uses the phrase “premessianic believer” to identify someone of a non-Christian faith who would be disposed to becoming a Christian if they were to hear Christianity preached to them.

He moves the point of conversion to Christianity beyond the individual's identification in this life with the Christian faith.

CONTRIBUTORS

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FOUR
VIEWS
ON

SALVATION IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD



Stanley N. Gundry, series editor
Dennis L. Okholm, general editor
Timothy R. Phillips, general editor

COUNTERPOINTS
BIBLE & THEOLOGY

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Another interesting context in which to examine inclusivistic Christian thinking is in regard to the Roman Catholic Church.

The historical position of the Roman Catholic Church has been that only those within the Catholic Church are eligible for salvation.

In the third century the Christian theologian Cyprian made this clear when he stated “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” - outside the church there is no salvation (Letter LXXII).

This was made official doctrine at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and reaffirmed at the Council of Florence in 1442.

However, this position changed as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Vatican II accepted the principle that adherents of other religious traditions could receive salvation in some form, while maintaining the theology that Christianity is the one true religion.



KARL RAHNER

A key figure in developing this aspect of Vatican II theology was a scholar called Karl Rahner.

Rahner believed that human beings, being composed of spirit, are naturally inclined to seek God and that our spirit can experience God's grace even before hearing the gospel.

People of other religious traditions can therefore experience God's grace. Those who have done so in other religions Karl Rahner calls “anonymous Christians” (Rahner 1986).

These anonymous Christians are justified in God's eyes and possess God's grace. Christ is present in the non-Christian believer through his spirit.



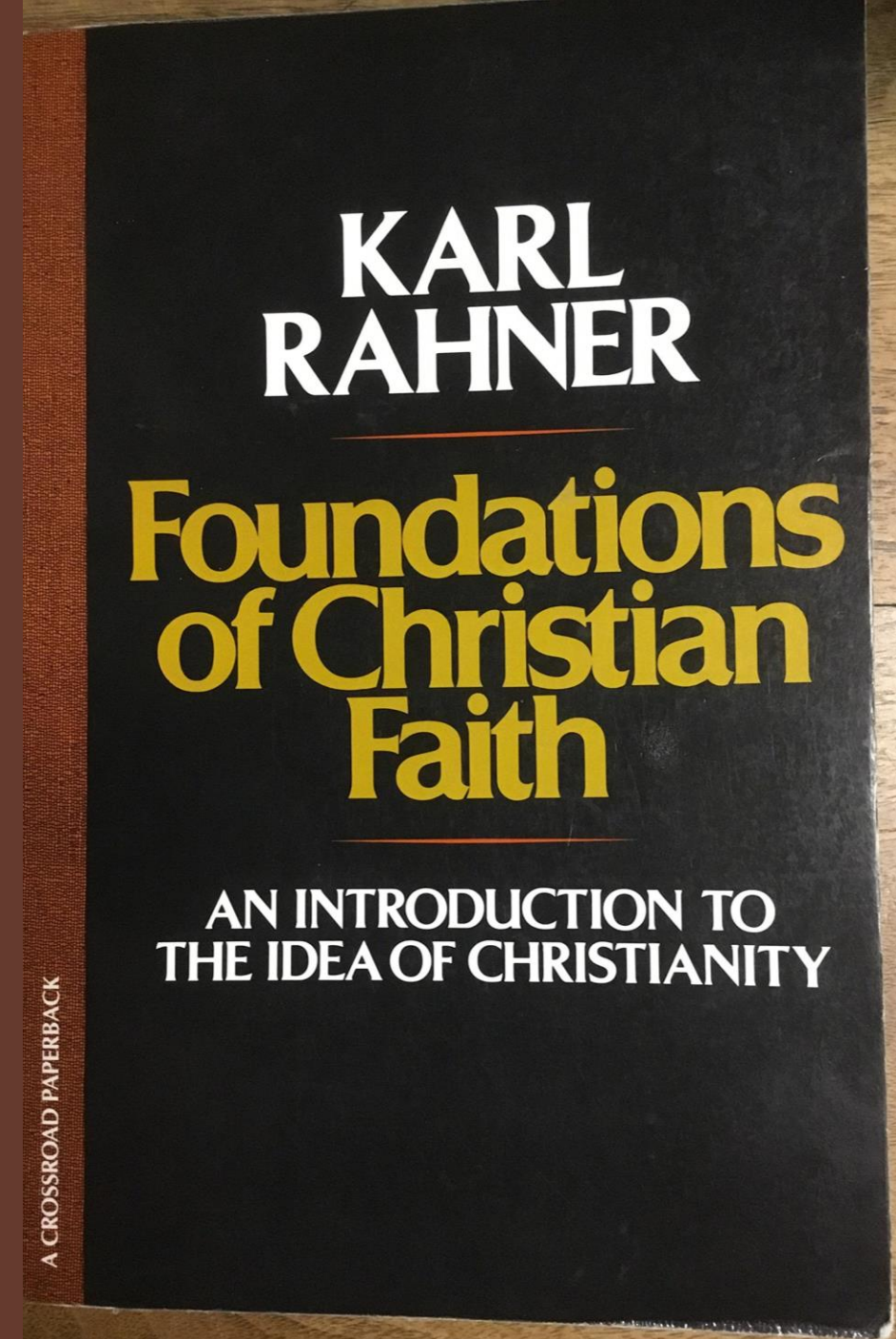
KARL RAHNER

Believers of non-Christian traditions who follow God and demonstrate selfless love for others are demonstrating the presence of the spirit in their lives.

This theology of anonymous Christians does not preclude Christians from engaging in mission. This is based in the belief that, although other religions can be a channel of grace, God's grace finds its highest expression in Christ.

In addition, for Rahner, not all religions give equally valid expression of the spirit. Other religions consist of a mixture of revelation and error (Rahner, 1978).

It is only in Christ's death and resurrection that God's manifestation in the Spirit has become apparent to humanity as a whole.



HANS KUNG

Hans Kung was a Catholic theologian who was a contemporary of Karl Rahner.

Kung was critical of the concept of “anonymous Christians”, which he regarded as patronising. He stated: “It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an 'anonymous Christian' as presumptuous” (Kung, 1984)

In the same way that a Christian would not care to be referred to as an “anonymous Hindu”, so a Hindu would not care to be referred to as an “anonymous Christian”.



HANS KUNG

However, like Rahner, Kung believed that God's grace could be mediated through non-Christian religious traditions. He accepted the broad outlines of Rahner's proposal (while rejecting the language), understanding the notion of anonymous Christianity as applying to those of other faiths who have not yet had the opportunity of becoming Christian.

This led to his later work in developing an outline of what he saw as shared ethic, termed a 'global ethic' which binds together differing religious traditions, despite their disagreements over matters of truth or salvation (Kung, 1993)

Hans
Küng

On Being a
Christian

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